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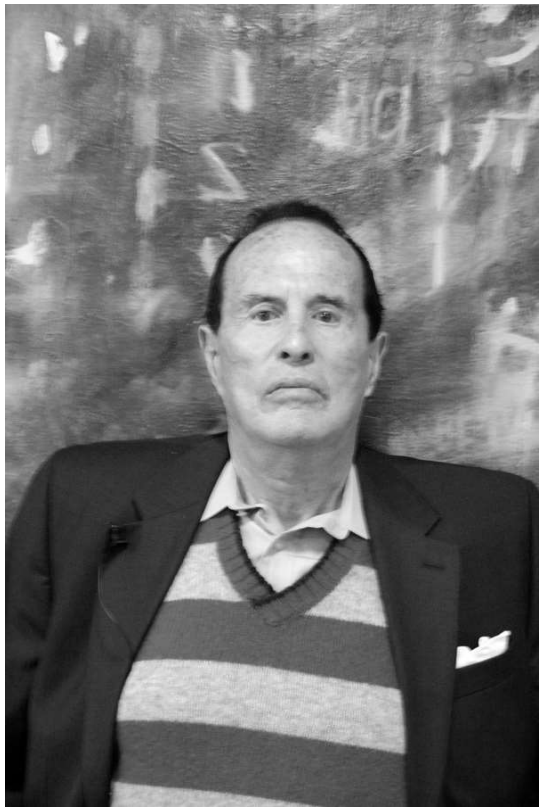
Wednesday, February 27, 2013

Kenneth Anger in conversation



Kenneth Anger, Copenhagen 2008 © Carl A

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In the autumn of 2008, I was invited to host an evening with filmmaker, writer and magician Kenneth Anger at Statens Museum for Kunst in Copenhagen, Denmark. In between showings of his key films, we talked, together with other invited Anger fans (Danish director Nicolai Winding Refn, Swedish artist Carl Michael von Hausswolff and Danish journalist Lars Movin). This was followed by a performance by Anger's musical project together with Brian Butler, *Kenneth Anger's Technicolor Skull*. A memorable evening, to say the least.

On the following day, I sat in conversation with Anger at the Danish Film School in front of a small but devoted crowd. Basically, most of Anger's films were shown and we talked in between the screening segments. What follows here is a transcript of that conversation at the film school.

[Screening of *Fireworks* (1947) and *Puce Moment* (1949)]

Fireworks *was a film that more or less immediately had a big impact. Could you tell us about where it was first shown and what the response was?*

It was first shown at the Coronet Theatre in Los Angeles, which was a small cinema. It was also a theatre where my friend Charles Laughton did plays like *Life of Galileo* by Brecht. That was actually playing when *Fireworks* was first screened at night. The first showing was at midnight. Among the audience was Robert Florey, who was working in Hollywood at that time. He was a very interesting French director who made films like *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. James Whale was also there, the director of *Frankenstein* and *The Bride of Frankenstein*. I became friends with James Whale and I remained a friend of his. Since it was a midnight screening, we didn't have any problems with it, like censorship. Then it went on to be shown in San Francisco at the Museum of Modern Art there. Then it gradually spread over the world, I guess.

Tennessee Williams was at the screening in San Francisco, as was Dr. Alfred Kinsey.

Yes, Tennessee Williams also became a friend. Dr. Kinsey came to my screening and he bought a copy of the film for the Kinsey Institute of Sex Research in Bloomington,

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Indiana. He wrote two famous books that came out in the 50s, *Sexual behavior in the human male*, and also a female version. So the first sale of a copy of my film was to Dr. Kinsey, on 16 mm. That was the available film format that you could get a good result with, 35 mm being beyond my grasp at that time. Later on, I made one film on 35 mm, when I lived in France: *Rabbit's Moon*. I never worked on Super 8. Now, I'm working on digital. I've covered all the bases.

What brought you to France originally was actually a screening of Fireworks *at a festival in Biarritz.*

Yes, the "Festival du film maudit", the festival of damned or cursed films. These were films that had problems with censorship. Jean Cocteau was in the jury and he gave a prize for "poetic film" to *Fireworks*. That encouraged me to come to France and meet Cocteau. I also met Jean Genet and Colette, who was still with us at the time. I wanted to meet André Gide but he died while I was on the boat.

You liked France very much and you were well received by, among others, Henri Langlois, the director of the French Cinématheque.

Yes. One thing that's important to mention about French culture is that they think there's only one language in the world, and that's French. Most of them refuse to speak anything but French. I knew this ahead of time, so I majored in French at the Beverly Hills High School. I arrived in France speaking the language, at least in a rudimentary way. I was fortunate to meet a lot of people, artists like Jean Genet. He saw my film and liked it. I think I inspired him to go on to make *Un chant d'amour*, which was a silent film.

I'm an independent film artist. I've never made a lot of money making my movies but I've managed to get grants and help. With one of the films we'll show here I had a wealthy patron, which is an old tradition in art. Many of the most famous paintings in history could be made because of patrons. Quite often, the paintings were commissioned by the Church. The Church was a big patron of art. Painters could put in their own eroticism if they were careful. There's a lot of nude flesh in historical painting. There was always an undercurrent of eroticism there.

I needed to make more money. I knew a lot about Hollywood history. So I wrote two books, *Hollywood Babylon 1* and *Hollywood Babylon 2*. That became a source of income for me.

We also just saw Puce Moment*, which is a nostalgic view of the silent era. Your grandmother worked in the studios, right?*

Yes, she was a costume mistress for United Artists during the silent period. It's someone who looks after the costumes. She had the idea to make duplicates. In films like *The Eagle*, Rudolph Valentino had to jump on and off horses and something would always get torn and then you'd have a duplicate ready. For *The Wizard of Oz*, Judy Garland had six gowns ready, just in case something happened.

There were other independent fimmakers emerging at the same time as you. You worked closely together with people like Curtis Harrington and Maya Deren in terms of distribution.

Not with Maya Deren, as she was on the East Coast. But Curtis and I had made little films and we had no way to get them shown, so we founded a company called Creative Film Associates. It was Curtis and me and a few people from San Francisco, like James Broughton. Later on, there was a company called Cinema 16, based in New York, that took over. It was a matter of shipping 16 mm reels back and forth. They're not nearly as cumbersome as 35 mm reels, which weigh a ton. Now everything is simplified with digital.

[Screening of *Rabbit's Moon* (1950) and *Eaux d'artifice* (1953)]

For *Rabbit's Moon*, I was given the negative by the Cinématheque Française. It was a leftover from some documentary project. It was the same stock that Cocteau used to make *Orphée*. I had a professional cameraman who was the son of the silent filmmaker Tourjansky. The actors came from the mime school in Paris. I made the sets and the costumes myself. It was filmed in a studio which I could use during the month of August. France officially closes up then and everyone goes away on vacation. I took advantage of that. I had one month to do everything.

These films were made during your first European stay. You got a great job as Langlois' assistant. How did you work together?

I arrived in France in the spring of 1950. The films that I'd done then were shown at the Cinématheque. That's where I met Jean Cocteau and Genet. Henri Langlois was the director of the Cinématheque and he proposed that I work for him. I was then his personal assistant for 12 years. They had a lot of American films from the silent period in their collection, but under different titles. I helped identify films with Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and so forth, matching them with the original American titles. I had a background in Hollywood history so I knew all of that. I was able to help them with the collection.

They also gave me the opportunity to edit a film by Eisenstein, *Que Viva Mexico!*, which was an unfinished project. It was actually a tragic story. The producer, Upton Sinclair, was a socialist but yet involved in capitalism. When he saw how much the film was costing in 1930, in Mexico, he pulled the plug on it. The film was never finished. An elaborate sequence of it, on a train with hundreds of extras, was never filmed. I've read the treatment, a very poetic treatment by Eisenstein. This very important piece of the film was never filmed at all. What remained was so wonderful but it had never been put in the proper order. Working from Eisenstein's treatment and a segment called *Death Day in Mexico*, and a feature cut of it called *Thunder over Mexico*, which has the beautiful images but not in the right order, I put all of these things together chronologically according to Eisenstein's script. This was shown at the Antibes film festival. It was a project where people were furious that I was allowed to do it. But I don't mind that. It was a very interesting project.

You had also seen Thunder over Mexico *as a boy.*

Yes, it was one of the first films I saw when I was a very young boy. I was taken by my grandmother, who thought it was a travelogue, a documentary about Mexico. She loved Mexico and had been there many times. She was rather shocked to see very sadistic things in it, like the peasants who are revolting against the oppressive government. It's historically correct but cruel. They buried them up to their necks and then the horses ran across the field until the skulls were crushed. Those are

images that stuck with me all my life, seeing them as a very young boy. But there were also many beautiful images.

You also attempted to film a ballet by Cocteau?

I was given permission by him to film his ballet *The Young Man and Death*. I filmed it on 16 mm outdoors, because I didn't have any lights. It's a very sadomasochistic story. She is a beautiful model who rejects the man amourously, and she even puts out a cigarette on his chest. He hangs himself, which is a wonderful illusion because he actually puts his arm around the pillar and he's strong enough to hold himself while hanging from the rope. Nurejev danced in the ballet later on. I transposed everything to a garden. The film was basically a study for a 35 mm film in Technicolor that I wanted to make. But even with a letter of recommendation from Cocteau I couldn't raise the money. It was a disappointment but I always overcome disappointments. I don't let them cast me into despair.

How did you come up with the idea to cast a midget in Eaux d'artifice?

By using a midget I completely altered the scale of the film. I was inspired by the etchings of Pirenesi, who was a master etcher. He did etchings of the ruins of Rome and also the garden of Tivoli. Classic famous etchings. He always made things seem bigger by putting tiny people in there. I wanted to find a small person and do what he did. The ruins of the Colosseum are majestic enough but if you double the scale by putting a tiny person there... The midget was a friend of Fellini's. Fellini knew all the freaks and strange people. He said to me that he knew a midget and that she'd be glad to do it. That's how that happened.

Kenneth Anger's Technicolor Skull, live the evening before this conversation, photo © Carl A

[Screening of *Inauguration of the Pleasure Dome* (1954)]

After your initial phase in France, you had returned to the US for a while. Originally, the idea for this film came from a costume party.

Yes. Halloween is the only time in America when we have a festival where people dress up in costumes. The carnival only exists in New Orleans, the Mardi Gras. A party was given in Malibu by one of the actresses, Renate Druks. The theme announced, several months ahead of time, “Come as your madness”. Everyone was not to tell anyone else what their personal madness was. I guess it was a sign of the egotism of this crowd, which consisted of bohemian artists mostly, that almost everyone came as a god or a goddess from antiquity. Once I saw the costumes, which were beautifully made, I said that I’d make a film of it, that I’d turn the party into a

film. The most famous person in the film was of course Anaïs Nin, who was a well known avant garde writer and poet. Samson de Brier played the main part, or actually several parts. He had appeared in a silent film, *Salome*, in which he plays the slave that committs suicide. I filmed my film over several weekends with the people coming in their costumes. The background is Samson de Brier's house, which was stuffed with his souvenirs.

In this film, you reached a new level of complexity, not only mythologically but also when it came to the technical aspects. For instance, you used a lot of superimpositions. Did you have evrything well arranged and planned before the editing began or was it more like an intuitive process?

I guess you could call it intuitive. I knew that I wanted to do double- and triple-printing. The excuse is that the people in this ceremony take a drink which is probably psychedelic in some way, or hallucinatory, or magic mushrooms, or LSD. I didn't want to make it specific. The patterns of illusions become thicker and more complex. I experimented with LSD years ago and you do get that effect. But I've never tried to make a film while on LSD because it's impossible to focus. You have various layers of depth. I've always been completely straight when I've made my films.

The references to spirituality, magic and even Crowley are more obvious and manifest than ever before in this film. How was Crowley regarded when you found out about him, so to speak, in the mid-1940s?

I was fortunate that Crowley had a magical son in California, in Jack Parsons, who was a famous scientist at Jet Propulsion Labs. He invented the fuel that took the Apollo-rocket to the moon. He was killed in an explosion unfortunately, but his widow, Cameron Parsons, plays the Scarlet Woman in my film. The red hair really was the colour of her hair at that time.

Crowley's work has strongly permeated your own work. How did that develop in the beginning? For instance, to what extent were Crowley's books available at that time in California?

Jack and Cameron Parsons had a collection of those books, most of them first editions and signed by Crowley. I had those books available to me. I found him a fascinating person. He was born in 1875 and he died in 1947, so I never met the man. But I knew various friends of his. I feel I know him, even though we never met face to face.

Why did you want to integrate this kind of symbolism in your films?

Crowley's religion is *Thelema*, which means Will in Greek. The will has to control what you do, but also love. These things were influences but I've always been more of an intuitive artist. I use symbols like others would use colours.

When you shot this film over several weekends, did you give people very specific directions or were they allowed to be free and play around?

It was totally controlled, like a ballet. The movements were controlled.

[Screening of *Scorpio Rising* (1963)]

What was it that was so fascinating for you about these Coney Island youngsters?

They were making their own motorcycles, customizing them. They were like folk artists working on machines. I found that a very fascinating subject. There are some motorcycle gangs that have a bad reputation because they've been involved in drug dealing and murders and things. But this wasn't a group like that. These were mostly Italian-Americans who made their money working in the fish market and then they put all of their money into their bikes. They all had girlfriends but their first girlfriend was their bike. The bike was almost more important than the girlfriend. She just sat on the back. It's a strange kind of innocent fetishism.

The film became famous for its creative use of contemporary pop music.

I think I was the first to use music like that. Now, it's become quite common. In order to show it in public I had to clear the rights, in 1964. At that time I did it through a music lawyer in New York. It doubled the price of the film. The film cost

$8000. The music rights cost another $8000. Over the years, I've made back what I spent on it.

How important was it for you, when working with the soundtrack, to have a specific song for a specific segment?

The lyrics are like an ironic commentary on the images. I was the first to use *Blue Velvet*, years before David Lynch. The song is about a girl who wore blue velvet. I used it deliberately on a leather jacket that had blue highlights, and blue jeans. It's an ironic comment on that kind of self narcissism.

It became a very successful independent film. But you also had some problems with it.

When it was first shown in Los Angeles at the Cinema Theatre, which usually showed unusual films, it was denounced by the American Nazi Party, of all things. They denounced it to the vice squad in Los Angeles. If someone makes a complaint, they have to act on it. They came to the theatre and seized the print of the film from the projection booth and arrested the manager of the theatre. Today it seems totally grotesque but at that time they thought they had the right to do that. The case went to the California Supreme Court, where it was declared OK, because it has "redeeming social values". This is a term that would later be used in other legal cases with films and censorship. It has redeeming qualities. It's not technically obscene.

One more thing about Scorpio Rising... *There had been a "stellium" in 1962, during which we shifted from the Age of Pisces to that of Aquarius. Was your film in any way a commentary to that?*

I enjoy the game of astrology. I don't take it terribly seriously. Maybe some of it is true. I use it in a kind of fantastic way. Scorpio is the sign of the zodiac that rules machinery and the sex organs. I'm an Aquarius, like James Dean, Franklin Roosevelt and, unfortunately, Ronald Reagan. I'm an Aquarius with Scorpio rising. An artist has a right to play around with these ideas. I don't have to justify it, whether it has any scientific value. It has a poetic value.

[Screening of *Kustom Kar Kommandos* (1965), *Invocation of my Demon Brother* (1969) and *Rabbit's Moon* (1971 version)]

Kustom Kar Kommandos *is also about a fetishistic inclination in some young men, with their "Dream Buggies". Have you since then ever come across any similar kind of obsession with machinery?*

Customizing cars is a very Californian thing, making these beautifully lacquered and chromed fantasy machines. If you know Freud... In the interior of the car in the film, the seats are shaped like vulvas. The guy designed everything himself. I couldn't tell him that his seats looked like something from the human anatomy. He made the interior of the car chrome, like mirrored sides. He could see himself reflected on all sides in this mobile box of fantasy. I chose that car because I found it particularly beautiful.

In the mid-60s you lived in San Francisco and started an ambitious project called Lucifer Rising*, with musician Bobby Beausoleil in the leading role. That time, things didn't turn out so well. Could you tell us about the original film you had in mind?*

I had this project of making a film about the fallen angel, Lucifer. It's a metaphor, probably some kind of alchemical metaphor originally, about spirit falling into matter. In this case, I was seeking an actor who could embody this spirit. Bobby Beausoleil was the guitarist ina group called Love, which was an acid rock group. He was 19, very beautiful. I asked him if he wanted to play this part in my film. It didn't work out because there was too much personality involved. When you're casting amateurs in films, the problem is how to hold on to them if you can't have them sign a contract or offer them money. These things become psychological problems. When you pick someone who is a rather difficult personality, it becomes even more of a problem. Basically, we couldn't come to an agreement. I didn't drive myself, but I had a van and he decided to just take it and drive off to Southern California from San Francisco, where we were sharing a Victorian house called "The Russian Embassy". The van broke down in the San Fernando Valley in front of a place called Spahn Ranch. That's where the Manson Family was staying. The girls came out and suggested Bobby move in with them. That's how he became involved with the Manson Family. He ended up killing someone and he's now serving a life term in

prison. I absolutely had nothing to do with it but it was an odd way for a kind of Devil figure to end up in real life trouble.

Invocation of my Demon Brother *was made with remnants of that original material.*

Bobby had gone into drug dealing behind my back. I didn't know this, but it was my house. He was a minor and I was an adult. If anyone had gotten into trouble, it would have been me. I found marijuana in the house and said no. When Bobby left after the quarrel we had, he took the van and all the film he could find, just out of spite. But I had scraps left in the cutting room bin. I took that material to London when I went back and did a rough assembly of it. I showed it to Mick Jagger and he said he'd do the soundtrack, improvising on the Moog synthesizer. He gave me that improvisation. I don't think he does that too often.

Your depression even made you place and ad in The Village Voice, stating "Kenneth Anger, Filmmaker 1947-1967".

I said I was finished and that I didn't want to work in film anymore. Everything was going wrong. But I changed my mind after I returned to Europe. I got encouragement from people like the Rolling Stones, Marianne Faithfull, Donald Cammell and others.

Rabbit's Moon *in this version from 1971 has a new soundtrack. Going back and retouching and re-editing is something quite consistent in your work.*

Well, *Rabbit's Moon* had a checkered story. I considered it a lost film. It was shot ion 35 mm and stored at the Cinématheque Française. They lost it. It disappeared and was lost for 20 years. The label had come off the can. There are thousands of films there. But I finally got it back after a long time.

[Screening of *Lucifer Rising* (1981), *Mouse Heaven* (2004) and *The Man We Want to Hang* (2002)]

Crowley took up painting when he was around 40. Particularly when he moved to Sicily. He did some quite interesting work there. It reminds me of the Fauves.

Crowley had a very direct way with colour. My film is a tribute to his painting.

Lucifer Rising *has a subtitle which is "A Love Vision". This was to balance Scorpio, which is so martial. Do you think that the film achieved that balance?*

I hope so. It's a bit like Yin and Yang, the night and the day.

Lucifer Rising *is an elaborate production, with acting and interesting environments. Donald Cammell, who plays Osiris, was well versed in Crowleyan mythology. What was it like with the others – Huggins, Faithfull and others? Did they feel that you had to explain things to them?*

I never explain anthing. They have to accept me and what I say. The one person that I began using was Mick Jagger's brother Chris. He went with me to Egypt. He's briefly seen in front of the Sphinx. He kept asking me to explain what he was supposed to do and I said, "Just do it!" I sent him home. He got a free trip back and forth.

In what way does this 1981 version differ from the one you had originally envisioned and shot with Beausoleil?

They're related in subject but with a completely different cast. I was happy to work with people like Marianne Faithfull, because she just did what I wanted. She didn't argue with me.

We're going to see Ich will *now. Could you tell us something about that?*

I've always been fascinated by the Nazi period. I worked in the film archive in France for so many years and I was always looking for images from that period. *Ich will* reflects the Hitler Jugend movement, which was the equivalent of the boy scouts. In fact, the Nazis took the idea from the boy scouts in England, which was something invented at the turn of the 20th century by Baden-Powell. There too, the idea was to create a bond with the youth, to prepare them to fight for the empire. People forget that that was the original motivation of the boy scouts, to prepare them for the

military. The transition to the military is not that difficult when you've been in the boy scouts.

My brother was an Eagle Scout, a high rank. I absolutely refused to go into it. I was the rebel, totally against joining. My father was a scout master but I said no already at a quite young age. And that's why Kenneth Anger is Kenneth Anger.

I carefully chose a statement or quote from William Shakespeare, from *The Tempest*, as part of the introduction to the film: "Beware of the words that come out of the mouth that transforms men into beasts." That's my only statement about the film. I absolutely cut out all the speeches and I've also cut out all the martial music and substituted it with Anton Bruckner's ninth symphony. That was his last, written when he was dying. He was a brilliant symphonist and, incidentally, Adolf Hitler's favourite symphonist at that time. The other great symphonist, Mahler, was completely rejected for racial reasons.

[Screening of *Ich will* (2008)]

This text has previously been published by Edda Publishing in the occultural anthology *The Fenris Wolf, issue no 4*

KENNETH ANGER

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